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Killing Time, Not Germans

Reserve Positions in the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division during the Battle of Normandy

ALEX SOUCHEN

Abstract: Allied victory during the Battle of Normandy is often attributed to operational and strategic factors, but the high-level focus on command and combat effectiveness obscures the infantry's lived experiences. Although combat was their primary purpose, soldiers killed time as often as they killed Germans. This article examines the significance of the reserve position and the "down time" that soldiers spent within its confines. It argues that the reserve position was critical to combat effectiveness and high morale because it provided defensive and offensive flexibility and surplus labour for work parties and logistical tasks, while officers used it to integrate reinforcements and manage the strain of battle through frequent rotations to the rear. For the troops, being stationed in reserve opened up a variety of experiences and activities that defined daily life, but as the Allied armies moved inland the meaning and significance of "rest" changed when the space for more elaborate rear area services was secured. Yet these new amenities were also accompanied by some unintended consequences as they helped spread an epidemic of dysentery and food poisoning that ravaged Canadian soldiers in July and August 1944.

IN SCHOLARLY and popular accounts of the Battle of Normandy, Allied victory is usually attributed to a mix of operational and strategic variables. First, the Allies gained aerial superiority over Western Europe and managed to surprise the enemy with a major amphibious assault on Normandy's coastline. Next, they deployed an overwhelming superiority of manpower and materiel resources in sustained combat operations that simultaneously offered lessons for improving tactical effectiveness and eventually wore down the German

forces arrayed against them. The Allies also benefitted from several strategic miscalculations made by the German high command, such as the ill-advised counterattack on American forces near Mortain in early August 1944.¹ However, despite the accuracy of these broader interpretations, the high-level focus on grand strategy, operational progress and combat effectiveness tends to obscure, rather than illuminate, the full breadth of the infantry's lived experiences.

Although combat was the infantry's primary purpose, daily life on the front lines included a diverse range of other, non-combat related experiences and events that contributed to Allied success. Indeed, for those at the sharpest end, there was much more to the experience of war than just fighting the enemy. Canadian soldiers killed time as often as they killed Germans and while historians have written much about the fighting, there remains a great deal more to be said about the "quiet" times in between each battle. This oversight is likely a product of the lasting debates and controversies surrounding Allied combat effectiveness in Normandy, and the Canadian performance in particular, which prompted scholars to prioritise tactical, operational and strategic paradigms ahead of other approaches.² Consequently, only a handful of studies have been written on the Canadian auxiliary services and entertainment units, soldiers' culture and civil-military relations, which leaves large gaps in our collective knowledge about

¹ Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); and Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

² Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 3-32. See also C. P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1960); and John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

how Canadian soldiers occupied themselves away from combat in Normandy.³

Through the close examination of battalion war diaries, this article explores the wider significance of the reserve position and the “down time” soldiers spent within its confines in relationship to the infantry’s lived experiences and operational progress in Normandy. All units in the Canadian Army were required to maintain a log, or war diary, of its activities for historical purposes. These diaries were usually maintained by members of the Intelligence or “I” Section, attached to battalion headquarters, who recorded all manner of events and actions in daily entries and often included photographs, orders, maps, newspapers and other materials that documented the unit’s social and cultural settings.⁴ Historians have long recognised the value of battalion war diaries for substantiating details about combat operations or understanding a unit’s circumstances and capabilities ahead of major engagements. But we must also be careful in interpreting these sources, precisely because they were maintained for historical purposes. Those responsible for the war diary were not interested in recording criticisms of high command or anything else that might tarnish their unit’s reputation, so the log entries tend to contain overly positive descriptions of unit operations and activities. Yet, despite these limitations, war diaries offer invaluable windows

³ Alan Hurst, *The Canadian Y.M.C.A. in World War II* (Goodfellow Printing, n.d.); Clifford H. Bowering, *Service: The Story of the Canadian Legion, 1925-1960* (Ottawa: Dominion Command, 1960); Scott Young, *Red Shield in Action: A Record of Canadian Salvation Army War Services in the Second Great War* (Toronto: Clarke & Co., 1949); *War Services of the Canadian Knights of Columbus, 1939-1947: A History of the Work of the Knights of Columbus Canadian Army Huts* (Montreal: Knights of Columbus, 1948); Laurel Halladay, “‘It Made Them Forget About the War For a Minute’: Canadian Army, Navy and Air Force Entertainment Units During the Second World War,” *Canadian Military History* 11, 4 (2002): 21-35; Sean Longden, *To the Victor the Spoils D-Day to VE-Day: The Reality Behind the Heroism* (Gloucestershire: Arris Publishing, 2004); Tim Cook, *Canadians Fighting the Second World War*, Vol. 1 and 2 (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2014 and 2015); and Terry Copp and Michelle Fowler, “Heavy Bombers and Civil Affairs: First Canadian Army in France, July-September 1944,” *Canadian Military History* 22, 2 (2015): 5-18.

⁴ War Diary (WD) – Canadian Scottish Regiment (CSR), Lieutenant T. A. Burge, “A Note of Appreciation for Work WELL DONE,” n.d., RG24 Department of National Defence fonds, vol. 15038, file 734(400), Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

into daily life on the front lines, particularly as they relate to the soldiers' experiences away from combat.⁵

This article makes three interrelated arguments. First, that the reserve position was tactically and operationally significant to combat operations and the maintenance of high morale. All units within the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division—whether at the brigade, battalion or company levels—established defences in depth, with the reserve position located behind the front lines but still close enough to support forward units in the event of an attack. This offered offensive and defensive flexibility that proved instrumental in overcoming the German counterattacks after D-Day. In addition to the tactical and operational advantages, unit commanders used the reserve position to maintain high morale by managing the physical and psychological strain of battle. Within the 3rd Division there was a constant rotation of units into reserve, as brigades, battalions and companies shifted sub-units in and out of combat so that troops could rest and reorganise before the next engagement. Moreover, these rotational tactics were also employed at the individual level as a pre-emptive measure to forestall nervous breakdowns and battle exhaustion casualties.

Second, this article argues that the human experience in war included a diverse range of events and activities that did not involve combat. Although the soldiers' stay in reserve was often cut short and proved no vacation from the rigours of war, being stationed there opened up a variety of opportunities and outlets that traditional military history often ignores. If units were not organising work parties, patrols or training reinforcements, soldiers had an opportunity to catch up on sleep and letter writing, do laundry, clean their equipment and themselves, unwind with recreational activity or loot from surrounding villages. This introduced a whole realm of different social interactions and activities that defined important elements of the lived experience, improved comradeship, helped soldiers cope with trauma and ultimately improved morale and unit cohesion.

Finally, this article argues that the experience of being in reserve evolved as the campaign in Normandy moved inland. During the bloody month after D-Day, the Allies possessed no safe rear area

⁵ Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006); and Christine Leppard, "Documenting the D-Day Dodgers: Canadian Field Historians in the Italian Campaign, 1943-1945," *Canadian Military History* 18, 3 (Summer 2009): 7-18.

large enough to support luxuries like field kitchens or concert venues. These types of amenities simply did not exist for the beleaguered members of the 3rd Division, but the troops still exercised agency and found ways to occupy themselves between combat actions. However, after the capture of Caen, there was a distinct change in the type of rest offered to soldiers and the reserve position took on new significance. By late July, elaborate rear area services were available on the continent so soldiers could watch movies or relax far away from German shells. Although scholars have generally ignored these changes, they were noted by the troops, especially when their diets were altered by field kitchens and when the 3rd Division was rotated into reserve for an extended break in early August. Yet, these new amenities were accompanied by unintended suffering and consequences. Throughout the campaign in Normandy, health and environmental conditions steadily deteriorated and the resulting squalor, depravity and swarms of flies brought on a scourge of food poisoning and dysentery right as the Canadian Army fought to capture Falaise.

RESERVE POSITIONS AND ROTATIONAL TACTICS

On any given day in Normandy, Canadian units were heavily engaged with the enemy as the grisly casualty rate attests. Over roughly seventy-six days, total Canadian casualties from all formations amounted to 18,444, of which 5,021 were fatal.⁶ Moreover, as Terry Copp has shown, by the end of September 1944, the 3rd Division had suffered through thirty-one “Intense Combat Days,” incurring an average of 298 casualties per day, while the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division endured thirty days with an average of 273 casualties.⁷ These statistics certainly speak to the horrific nature of the fighting, but we must also remember that the troops were not in action for every minute of that time. After all, the inverse of Copp’s statistics highlights how both infantry divisions spent forty-five and forty-six days, respectively, without “intense combat.”

⁶ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 271.

⁷ The criteria for the term “Intense Combat Days” was established by the Operational Research teams of the 21st Army Group. Terry Copp, “To the Last Canadian? Casualties in 21st Army Group,” *Canadian Military History* 18, 1 (2009): 3-6.

Even periods of the worst fighting were interspersed with periodic breaks. For example, in his after-action report about the Canadian Scottish Regiment's (Can Scots) counterattack on Putot-en-Bessin on 8-9 June 1944, Private R. H. Tutte felt it important enough to include a statement about his unit's lunch break. During a "quiet spell" around noon they stopped to eat and he remarked that "it was certainly very decent of 'Jerry' to allow a pause for refreshments."⁸ The biting sarcasm aside, Tutte's description offers insight into the wider scope of experiences on the front lines. Even at the height of combat operations, short breaks occurred whenever feasible. Far from being an insignificant part of combat operations, unit commanders at all levels recognised the value of rest and used their reserve positions accordingly. As this section shows, to maintain high morale and better manage the psychological and physical strain of combat, commanders rotated battalions, companies and individuals into reserve for short respites. The reserve position, therefore, not only provided greater defensive depth and tactical flexibility, it also allowed troops to regroup and reorganise before heading back out for the next encounter with the enemy.

In the weeks after D-Day, the 3rd Division occupied territory north-west of the city of Caen. Its three brigades, each consisting of three infantry battalions, established fortress positions in their respective sectors by deploying two battalions forward and one in reserve. Before Caen was captured in early July, these brigade fortresses were formed around clusters of small villages that bisected major roads or railway embankments.⁹ The deployment of the 7th Brigade in early June serves to illustrate how this fortress tactic worked. In the early morning of 7 June, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles (RWR) and the Regina Rifles (The Johns) captured their intermediate D-Day objectives, the strategically vital towns of Putot and Bretteville L'Orgueilleuse, respectively. As Marc Milner has shown, both units were then subjected to furious German counterattacks and, while the Johns held their positions until relieved on the night of 18-19 June, the RWR were overrun and nearly annihilated on 8 June. Only the evening counterattack by the Can Scots, 7th Brigade's reserve battalion stationed in the rear at Secqueville-en-Bessin, restored the

⁸ WD – CSR, Private R. H. Tutte, "The Advance, Occupation, and Holding of the Bridge at Putot-en-Bessin As I Saw It," n.d., 3, RG24, vol. 15037, file 734(400), LAC.

⁹ Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 26-31, 61-76.

situation and they defended Putot until relieved and redeployed to Rots ten nights later.¹⁰

Despite the heavy losses, the brigade's deployment offered sufficient defensive depth and operational flexibility to hold the crucial positions bisecting the Caen-Bayeux highway. While the Canadian Scottish and Regina Rifles bore the brunt of continuous action throughout most of June, the Winnipeggers were placed in reserve where they rebuilt their shattered infantry companies.¹¹ Thus, the 7th Brigade example demonstrates that even at the height of major battles, some units were in reserve and not in direct confrontation with the enemy. To say that the 7th Brigade was in continuous combat from D-Day onwards makes perfect sense when utilising a broader operational-strategic paradigm to interpret events, but when exploring the experience of war from the sharpest end, such generalisations about the continuity of combat operations are obscured and less definitive.

This is also evident on a smaller scale, as similar arrangements were employed within each infantry battalion. Depending on the circumstances, a battalion's Commanding Officer (CO) established a rotation amongst his four rifle companies by positioning one or two in reserve for a short period of time. Much like the brigade fortresses, this provided the battalion with a variety of advantages, such as greater defensive and offensive potential for patrols or counterattacks. Moreover, the rotation of companies into reserve ensured that relief was distributed somewhat evenly and if one was particularly decimated, it could receive a short break to absorb reinforcements or collect more supplies. In the heavy fighting at Bretteville, the Johns employed this rotation in at least one documented instance. On 15 June, the war diarist noted that "A" company was repositioned to the same area as battalion headquarters and, although its members were shelled at various times throughout the day, withdrawing them a few hundred metres away from the front lines was a welcomed break.¹²

Similarly, in the 9th Brigade's sector on 8 June, "C" company of the Highland Light Infantry of Canada (HLI) was positioned in an

¹⁰ WD – Regina Rifles (RR), log entry, 7-19 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15198, file 744, LAC; WD – Royal Winnipeg Rifles (RWR), log entry, 7-19 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15233, file 934/1, LAC; WD – CSR, log entry, 7-19 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15037, file 734(400), LAC; and Marc Milner, *Stopping the Panzers: The Untold Story of D-Day* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).

¹¹ WD – RWR, log entry, 11-14 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15233, file 934/1, LAC.

¹² WD – RR, log entry, 15 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15198, file 744, LAC.

open field and its soldiers spent the better part of the next thirty-six hours huddled in slit trenches under observation from the Germans who, in St. Contest and Galmanche, shelled anything that moved. Trapped in the hell of continuous shelling without an ability to fight back, nerves began to fray. As the war diarist noted on 9 June, “C [company] has been putting in an uncomfortable few days ... they are beginning to resemble the earth they live in and are feeling the strain.”¹³ When civilians reported that Buron was unoccupied, plans were made to send “C” company out to investigate, but Lieutenant-Colonel (Lt.-Col.) F. M. Griffiths astutely decided it was best to postpone the patrol and instead moved “C” company to the rear on the afternoon of 10 June. The company took up a much preferable position in a small wooded area behind the church in Villons-les-Buissons and received a twelve-hour break before heading out on a fighting patrol into Buron the next morning.¹⁴

These types of rotational tactics weaponised rest. The periodic breaks—interspersed between episodes of intense terror and killing—brought some meagre relief to surviving soldiers, which maintained morale and forestalled battle exhaustion from spiralling out of control. These types of rotational tactics were largely derived from experiences in North Africa, Italy and the Pacific where the British and Commonwealth armies discovered that improved rear area services, welfare provisions and educational resources were essential to reducing neuropsychiatric casualties amongst citizen soldiers.¹⁵ Therefore, all battalions in the 3rd Division developed various internal methods for addressing the persistence of “mental fatigue” but rotations into reserve remained the primary countermeasure. For example, new arrivals to infantry companies were often paired with experienced soldiers to steady nerves, offer advice, maintain discipline and better acclimatise them to life in slit trenches (especially at night). Officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were also instructed to “watch very carefully” for signs of strain in the troops under their commands.¹⁶ If a particular individual was deemed to be at risk of a psychological breakdown, officers and NCOs acted pre-emptively

¹³ WD – Highland Light Infantry (HLI), log entry, 9 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC.

¹⁴ WD – HLI, log entry, 8-11 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC.

¹⁵ Fennell, *Fighting the People's War*, 446-50, 530-39.

¹⁶ “Battle Experience Questionnaire (BEQ), #205, Major J. G. Stothard,” RG24, vol. 10450, LAC.

by removing the soldier from the proximate causes of his nervous state and sending him to the battalion's Medical Officer (MO) for an initial diagnosis and treatment.¹⁷ This usually resulted in the patient receiving twenty-four to forty-eight hours of rest at "A" Echelon, the battalion's rear area.

"A" Echelon was sometimes called "Happy Valley" by the troops and was usually located furthest from the front and under the command of the headquarters company commander. It was here where all the LOB (Left Out of Battle) personnel were stationed before an attack, along with all the vehicles not in use and any reinforcements that required more training before joining the rifle companies. In effect, it was the crossroads of battalion personnel—everyone who was departing from or arriving to the battalion passed through this administrative hub.¹⁸ At "A" Echelon, soldiers exhibiting signs of exhaustion were given a chance to sleep, get clean and eat a hot meal. As Major (Maj.) Clifford Chadderton explained, exhaustion cases in the RWR were housed in "the tent" where the patient received rest and was encouraged to discuss his traumatic experiences with others. In many instances this system was "enough to restore the courage to go back and take part in a dangerous and deadly existence" and according to him the process was always done without official records so the troops did not have to worry about any adverse consequences or accusations of cowardice.¹⁹

If the stay at "A" Echelon was not enough to treat the soldier, he was transferred to the 22nd Field Ambulance where Dr. Robert Gregory, the 3rd Division's psychiatrist, managed a separate casualty system for severe cases of battle exhaustion.²⁰ On the whole, centralising only the worst cases functioned fairly well, as Gregory reported only 213 exhaustion cases within the 3rd Division during the first fifteen days after D-Day, of which 124 recovered. By the

¹⁷ "Psychiatric Problems Amongst Canadian Troops in Normandy," 1 August 1944, RG24, vol. 12631, file 11/Psychiatry/5, LAC.

¹⁸ William Barnard, *The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, 1860-1960: One Hundred Years of Canada* (Don Mills: Ontario Publishing Company, 1960), 201.

¹⁹ Clifford Chadderton, *Excuse Us! Herr Schicklgruber: A Memoir of an Officer who Commanded an Infantry Company of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles in Normandy* (Ottawa: War Amputations of Canada, 2004), 85-88, quote 86.

²⁰ Terry Copp and Bill McAndrew, *Battle Exhaustion: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 110-20; and WD - 22nd Field Ambulance, log entry, 10 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15892, file 766, LAC.

end of June, his system boasted a 64 per cent return rate for severe cases and the success carried on into July, when the 1st Canadian Exhaustion Unit reported 103 cases from the 3rd Division, far fewer than the 391 recorded from the 2nd Canadian Division.²¹ Yet, these numbers represented only a partial reflection of reality since Gregory never saw the mild cases that were treated by battalion MOs at “A” Echelons.

The use of “A” Echelon appears to have worked quite well in combatting exhaustion cases. By the end of June, there were plans to expand capacity by adding a rest area at Corps headquarters, where greater resources and services could be concentrated. According to the war diarist for the HLI, by 30 June, this new rest area was able to accommodate one soldier per battalion for four days. As the diarist concluded, “it is thought that any man who is beginning to feel the strain may be saved from becoming a battle exhaustion case if sent back for a few days rest. Here he can get baths, wash his clothes, see shows and partake of other organized recreation. It is expected that this will be expanded to take in more men as time goes on.”²² Thus, even though a safe and quiet rear area did not exist until after the capture of Caen, every battalion CO in the 3rd Division adopted rotational tactics to better manage the physical and psychological strain amongst his subunits.

WORKING WHILE RESTING

Although reserve positions were located further to the rear and somewhat removed from the immediacy of combat, being stationed there did not entail a holiday. In fact, the term “rest” was a partial misnomer, given its abject qualities and the laborious demands placed on those resting in reserve. In order to be tactically and operationally effective, especially at the battalion and company levels, units stationed in reserve could not be located more than a few hundred metres from the front. Therefore, these positions were

²¹ WD – Assistant Director of Medical Services, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division (ADMS), log entry, 26 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15661, file 700, LAC; and “Quarterly Report – 1st Canadian Exhaustion Unit,” Appendix II, October 1944, RG24, vol. 12631, file 11/Psychiatry/5, LAC.

²² WD – HLI, log entry, 30 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC.

hardly ever out of the range of German mortar or artillery fire, which greatly affected the overall quality of rest that troops received. Moreover, in June and early July, the beachhead was too narrow to be safe from any German shelling, so even if a soldier was sent to “A” Echelon or the 22nd Field Ambulance, the sights, smells and sounds of war were still present and the sporadic shellfire was just as harmful to one’s life expectancy. Trapped in the paradox of frontline existence, the infantry never really got a chance to escape the hellish nightmare surrounding them. As the war diarist for the Queen’s Own Rifles (QOR) wrote after his unit was withdrawn for rest after the Battle of Carpiquet in early July: “[Troops] are finally established in their rest area. Galmanche. The lads are not pleased with the spot at all for the [buildings] are completely wrecked – there are dead animals and Germans all over the place and it is certainly not a spot to put the mind at rest. However the best is made of a bad go and the men bed down.”²³

In addition to combat duties, reserve units were also tasked with other responsibilities that were nearly as demanding and difficult as fighting the enemy. During lulls in battle, battalion areas remained a beehive of activity as reserve forces were often utilised as surplus labour. In many cases, they were ordered to fortify defences or improve rear area infrastructure, meaning that soldiers in reserve could dig twice as much as those guarding the front line. For example, in the weeks after D-Day the North Shore Regiment occupied Rosel in a comparatively quiet sector of the front. During that time, work parties were continuously organised and sent out under the cover of darkness. On the night of 15-16 June, “A” company provided a covering and carrying party to prepare a minefield between Rosel and Vieux Caïron. The work would have continued on 17 June, but the wire and picket assignment was cancelled and the unit moved to Le Mesnil Patry the following day, where the hard work was restarted from scratch.²⁴ For soldiers already weary from combat, the extra physical exertion was an unwelcomed burden, so being assigned to work parties could spark resentment and frustration. At Les Buissons on the night of 27-28 June, “A” and “B” companies of the North

²³ WD – Queen’s Own Rifles (QOR), log entry, 12 July 1944, RG24, vol. 15169, file 753, LAC.

²⁴ WD – North Shore Regiment (NSR), log entry, 15 and 17 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15127, file 742, LAC.



Figure 1. A rare photograph of a carrying party. Note the boxes of compositions and the jugs of water. [Library and Archives Canada, Regina Rifles War Diary, July 1944]

Nova Scotia Highlanders were ordered to dig the 9th Brigade's new command post. During the night, the Brigade Major instructed them to dig the hole "big enough to drive a jeep into." His orders drew the ire of "B" company's second-in-command, who reportedly told the officer that his men were not members of the "Todt Organization"—a reference to the Germans' use of slave labour.²⁵

Aside from digging, work parties were formed for other purposes, such as transporting ammunition, equipment and rations within units. Every battalion established a storage area near brigade headquarters, called "B" Echelon, where the unit's quartermaster

²⁵ WD – North Nova Scotia Highlanders (NNSH), log entry, 27 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15122, file 734, LAC.

received shipments from the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps and scheduled the distribution of supplies to infantry companies every seventy-two hours. This usually involved packing trucks to the brim, moving them forward (sometimes under heavy fire) and unloading all manner of supplies and weaponry near battalion headquarters. At that point, carrying parties were formed within companies and the materiel was dispersed to platoons throughout the battalion (see Figure 1).²⁶ However, when forward companies were unable to spare the manpower, reserve forces were called upon for double-duty, hauling rations, water, kit, ammunition and all manner of other supplies into frontline positions and then their own.

This lifeline of materiel was essential to all offensive and defensive operations, but equally important was the supply of capable reinforcements. In the weeks after D-Day, casualties in the 3rd Division skyrocketed at rates alarmingly similar to those of the First World War. As always, infantry battalions suffered the highest losses when companies, platoons and sections were decimated by the grueling and bitter fighting: by 30 September the 3rd Division had sustained over 9,000 total casualties.²⁷ According to Robert Engen's recent study *Strangers in Arms*, casualties were so appallingly high that the social and demographic cohesion of the soldiers' primary groups were rapidly torn apart in the farm fields north and south of Caen.²⁸ This situation challenges many assumptions and theories about morale, or the willingness of individuals and groups to fight and persevere in combat. If morale depended, as many theories postulate, on the peer pressure of comradeship and group loyalty, then it should have broken down completely in the heavy fighting, when the influx of so many strangers replaced old friends or when shattered subunits were amalgamated to form new groups with few shared experiences.²⁹ However, censorship summaries and morale reports from British and Commonwealth forces in Normandy in June and July consistently

²⁶ "Feeding an Army," n.d., RG24, vol. 12750, file 24/Episodes/7, LAC; Barnard, *The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada*, 201; and Arnold Warren, *Wait for the Wagon: The Story of the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), 280-85.

²⁷ Copp, "To the Last Canadian?" 6.

²⁸ Robert Engen, *Strangers in Arms: Combat Motivation in the Canadian Army, 1943-1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 151-52.

²⁹ Engen, *Strangers in Arms*, 3-17.

indicated that morale remained high—especially amongst Canadian units—so clearly other factors were at play.³⁰

Engen offers a compelling hypothesis for why Canadian units maintained high morale during the bloodletting, arguing that “swift trust” was a decisive factor. Swift trust, or the ability to quickly form trust and cohesion within new groups and without long-term, face-to-face interactions, was crucial to Canadian combat effectiveness amidst the heavy casualties. To replace the losses in rifle companies, battalion COs were constantly shuffling manpower between units, cobbling together ad hoc groups of green replacements with surviving veterans rotated into reserve. Within this framework of swift trust, larger structural factors played important roles in building effectiveness and cohesion, such as common training, familiarity with doctrine and tactics and institutional affiliations and knowledge.³¹ In that sense, as Caroline D’Amours has shown, the Canadian Army’s reinforcement system performed quite well in Northwest Europe because it managed to equip replacements with the basic skills and knowledge to swiftly integrate into new units—if they survived long enough in battle.³²

The reserve position offered the space and time to reconstitute new units and further cement the bonds of swift trust. With the infusion of so many new faces and inexperienced soldiers into decimated battalions, COs started using the reserve position for extra training and to better acclimatise new arrivals with unit drill. In the Regina Rifles, where casualty rates reached 44 per cent by 22 June, Lt.-Col. F. M. Matheson was forced to create an “NCO School” at “A” Echelon, where new NCOs received lessons about their roles and responsibilities, as well as the battalion’s unique history, procedures and traditions.³³ Around the same time, Lt.-Col. G. H. Christiansen, CO of the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders (SDGs), decided that similar measures were needed in his battalion. On 16 and 18 June, he put his reserve position to good use by organising a supplemental training regimen based on combat

³⁰ There was a serious drop in morale in August. Fennell, *Fighting the People’s War*, 503-50.

³¹ Engen, *Strangers in Arms*, 15-17, 151-60.

³² Caroline D’Amours, “Reassessment of a Crisis: Canadian Infantry Reinforcements during the Second World War,” *Canadian Army Journal* 14, 2 (2012): 73-89.

³³ WD – RR, battalion order, 28 June 1944, and log entry, 29 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15198, file 744, LAC.

experience in Normandy. In addition to rifle and Bren-gun practice, the training regimen also focused on patrolling and survival skills. Troops were forced to crawl 500 metres and taught to communicate silently, while engineers gave lessons on an assortment of German mines and boobytraps.³⁴ These types of training programs helped to pool collective assets and quickly integrate veterans and newcomers, which helped to attenuate morale problems caused by the rapid turnover in personnel.

Training was not the only method used for building swift trust and integrating reinforcements. The SDGs' training program was also complemented by a unit celebration: in the midst of the furious fighting in June, Christiansen authorised a "half-holiday" to commemorate the day on which the unit was mobilised four years earlier (see Figure 2). On 20 June, two twelve-hour shifts were organised during which only 50 per cent of the unit was on duty at one time. An officers' and sergeants' dinner was organised, alcohol rations were issued to the men for the first time in France and packages from the auxiliary services were distributed to the companies in the evening.³⁵ This day of celebration allowed new and veteran soldiers to interact in a more relaxed setting, which promoted greater integration and familiarity between personnel as veterans took the opportunity to recount past experiences and unit folklore. Thus, the celebration reinforced battalion traditions and inspired unit pride.³⁶ These types of initiatives illustrate both the diversity of methods used to integrate reinforcements and also the critical role of reserve positions, as the whole celebration would not have been as special without the twelve-hour break. Thus, the reserve position provided combat units with the opportunity to build more cohesive social relations and bond as cooperative entities before re-entering the chaos of battle.

³⁴ WD – Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders (SDGs), log entry, 16 and 18 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15270, file 752, LAC.

³⁵ WD – SDGs, "4th Anniversary 20 Jun 44," and log entry, 19-20 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15270, file 752, LAC.

³⁶ Alex Souchen, "The Culture of Morale: Battalion Newspapers in the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, June-August 1944," *The Journal of Military History* 77, 2 (2013): 555-56.



Figure 2. NCOs toasting the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders' four-year anniversary, Vieux Cairen, 20 June 1944. [Library and Archives Canada, Department of National Defence, Lieutenant (Lieut.) Ken Bell, PA-138272]

ACTIONS AND DISTRACTIONS

Regardless of the additional duties required of reserve forces, when rotated to the rear soldiers could look forward to a variety of other, non-combat related activities. By far the most welcomed opportunities involved sleeping and cleaning. Practically every unit war diarist noted the prevalence of these activities when soldiers rotated into reserve. Perhaps the HLI war diarist summed up the situation best when his unit received some “down time” a week after D-Day:

This rest gave everyone a chance to get out in the bright warm sun, have a bath and catch up on a little sleep. The strain of the last week had been considerable and it was only when things slacked off that the men realized it. For the first time since landing they were able to take off their clothes, get a good wash and clean up and do some washing.³⁷

Things were similar in other battalions that had engaged in heavy fighting. In the wake of the battles for Buron and Authie, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders were moved to Les Buissons on 10 June and the break allowed “everyone [to get] a bit of rest” after a few horrific days.³⁸ Similarly, the Regina Rifles’ war diary noted the prevalence of sleep after the Battle of Bretteville. The battalion had been defending, arguably, the most critical sector of the Anglo-Canadian front for almost two weeks, so the vast majority of surviving veterans took the opportunity to “catch up on [their] sleep” in Bray.³⁹

The importance of sleep cannot be overstated. Sleep was a luxury that few could afford in battle and many soldiers went days without it. As Captain (Capt.) Ronald Shawcross, a company commander with the Johns explained, “[i]n daylight I used to visit each platoon every three hours and at night every hour ... It was not conducive to rest or regular meals but then I couldn’t easily be seen by the Germans at night and also I could help my company stay awake.”⁴⁰ In numerous letters to his wife, Capt. Harold MacDonald, a company commander with the North Shores, recounted his exhaustive duties. After describing one particularly eventful day in July, he simply hoped for a “chance to sleep” that night, but the fortunes of war allowed him only an hour’s nap at dawn.⁴¹ On the frontlines, there was little time for sleep and consequently whenever a chance for extra rest presented itself soldiers made the most of it, as Shawcross did when he was rotated to “A” Echelon for a few days in early July.⁴²

³⁷ WD – HLI, log entry, 12 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC.

³⁸ WD – NNSH, log entry, 10 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15122, file 734, LAC.

³⁹ WD – RR, log entry, 18 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15198, file 744, LAC.

⁴⁰ Ronald G. Shawcross, “*What Was It Like??*” *A Rifleman Remembers: The Royal Regina Rifles Regiment “Swift and Bold”: Some Memoirs of World War II, 1939-1945* (Victoria: n.p., 2004), 154.

⁴¹ Harold MacDonald and M. A. MacDonald, “In the Heat of Battle: Letters from the Normandy Campaign,” *Canadian Military History* 11, 2 (2002): 35-36.

⁴² Shawcross, “*What Was It Like*,” 167.

Extra time for sleep was accompanied by time for washing and cleaning. At the front, it was hard to keep one's self and equipment clean when the only available shelter was a muddy slit-trench exposed to the elements. After wearing the same clothing for days on end, cleaning uniforms was a top priority. When moved to quiet areas for more than a few hours, soldiers made the most of the opportunity and availed themselves of the surrounding rivers, wells or tubs for washing. This practice was so common it became problematic because soldiers left their laundry out in the sun to dry without any regard for camouflage or concealment. This prompted the Regina Rifles CO to prohibit hanging clothing in places that were visible from the air.⁴³ Furthermore, kit inspections were also carried out during this time as officers took the opportunity to ensure that soldiers repaired any tears in their uniforms and cleaned their weapons and equipment. If any deficiencies were discovered, soldiers were paraded to the Quartermaster who issued replacements.⁴⁴

When finished cleaning their kit and clothing, soldiers took the opportunity to wash themselves. For some, a good shave and maybe a decent haircut were always welcomed, especially if one could secure hot water. Others improvised their own facilities, such as Riflemen E. Deblois and J. C. Sackfield of the QOR who bathed in a discarded tub in Bretteville—and even helped scrub the dirt from each other's backs (see Figure 3). Officers went to similar lengths. On a quiet day in Les Buissons, the senior officers and NCOs from the North Nova's "A" company took the time to enjoy a quick sponge bath behind the company carrier.⁴⁵ In other cases, soldiers used the nearby rivers and streams, though they were careful to swim far away from designated "water points" so as to avoid contaminating local water supplies.⁴⁶

There were also official channels through which soldiers could get clean. Mobile laundry and bath units roamed the 3rd Division's area throughout the Normandy campaign. Whenever these units arrived, battalion headquarters organised a rotation in which one company was paraded there at a time. These units, operated by the Royal

⁴³ WD – RR, battalion order, 23 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15198, file 744, LAC.

⁴⁴ WD – NS, log entry, 10 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15127, file 742, LAC; WD – HLI, log entry, 12 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC; and WD – RR, log entry, 18 and 20 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15198, file 744, LAC.

⁴⁵ WD – NNSH, log entry, 16 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15122, file 734, LAC.

⁴⁶ WD – QOR, battalion order, 11 July 1944, RG24, vol. 15169, file 753, LAC; and WD – RWR, log entry, 10 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15233, file 934/1, LAC.



Figure 3. Riflemen E. Deblois (in the tub) and J. C. Sackfield, Bretteville, 20 June 1944. [Library and Archives Canada, Department of National Defence, Lieut. Frank Duberville, PA-190809]

Canadian Ordnance Corps, provided soldiers with hot showers and deloused uniforms. However, most Canadian Mobile Laundry and Bath Units did not arrive on the continent until late July; only the 7th Mobile Laundry and Bath Unit landed in June.⁴⁷ This not only speaks to the deteriorating and dismal state of hygiene amongst the troops, but also suggests the importance of individual initiative in securing unofficial channels for washing.

⁴⁷ WD – 7th Mobile Laundry and Bath Unit, log entries, various dates, June 1944, RG24, vol. 16120, file 494, LAC.



Figure 4. An unidentified infantryman of the 9th Canadian Brigade writing a letter, 8-9 July 1944. [Library and Archives Canada, Department of National Defence, Lieut. Frank Duberville, PA-132800]

Another prominent activity undertaken in reserve was letter writing (see Figure 4). Whether on the offensive or consolidating a position, the responsibilities of officers and other ranks were many and the opportunity to write letters home was not always available. Some soldiers, like Capt. MacDonald, went to astounding lengths to find the time to write.⁴⁸ But for every prolific writer, there were others who wrote home only when they had the free time. Although letter writing could occur at any moment, it probably happened most when soldiers were pulled into reserve. As the North Novas' war diarist

⁴⁸ MacDonald and MacDonald, "In the Heat of Battle," 29-43.

noted on 19 June, while his unit was still in the 9th Brigade's reserve position at Les Buissons, "[t]he boys spend a lot of time writing home these days as there is not much else for them to do."⁴⁹ Far from being insignificant to combat operations, opportunities for letter writing were paramount to maintaining high morale. As Jonathan Fennell and Robert Engen have shown, letter writing and mail deliveries formed the bedrock of unit morale as the *esprit de corps* of all British and Commonwealth armies was intimately connected to social and political factors on the home front. Regular correspondence with loved ones and friends bolstered fighting spirits and kept soldiers abreast of issues back home. Similarly, the regular delivery of mail to forward units affirmed the soldier's trust in higher authorities and the logistics sustaining their perilous existence.⁵⁰ Indeed, any breakdown in communications between the war front and home front was a devastating blow to the military's combat effectiveness.

After finishing all of their immediate chores and letter writing, soldiers were left to fill the remaining time on their own initiative. This was especially the case in June and early July when the Allies could not organise any large recreational activities beyond the range of German guns. Many soldiers played cards and gambled or took advantage of the increasing supply of reading materials and newspapers circulated by the auxiliary services.⁵¹ However, most often, the troops explored nearby villages that local inhabitants had abandoned. In doing so, they took whatever was left behind. As the HLI's war diarist noted when his battalion entered the deserted village of Les Buissons on 12 June, "[t]he men spent hours feeding and watering [the animals]. Many chickens found their way into the stew pot in the next couple days. And of course the cows were milked. After three weeks of compo rations you can be sure the farmers' potato patch and onion patch took a beating."⁵²

Looting was a common occurrence throughout the Normandy campaign and the HLI war diarist frequently noted his battalion's proficiency at it, often with humorous anecdotes such as one instance when two soldiers argued over a stolen cow:

⁴⁹ WD – NNSH, log entry, 19 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15122, file 734, LAC.

⁵⁰ Fennell, *Fighting the People's War*, 3; and Engen, *Strangers in Arms*, 237-39.

⁵¹ John Ellis, *The Sharp End of War: The Fighting Man in World War II* (London: David & Charles Ltd., 1980), 299-301; and Fennell, *Fighting the People's War*, 530-39.

⁵² WD – HLI, log entry, 12 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC.

Two soldiers could be seen arguing furiously along these lines, “Where are you going with my cow” “That’s not your cow, it is my cow” “Like Hell it is I’ve been feeding it for two days.” And henchmen hoping for a taste of bovine nectar would substantiate the arguments of both.⁵³

Soldiers looted far more than just food. Since field comforts and personal items were not always available, all manner of other things were scrounged by soldiers. They took mattresses (for sleeping), barn doors (for covering their slit trenches) and anything else that augmented or maintained a minimal standard of living. Charles Martin, a Company-Sergeant Major in the QOR, later explained in his memoirs that his unit liberated a cast iron cooking pot and whenever ration supplies were low, they gathered up “all the odds and ends we could find around the village” and tossed them into the “makeshift super-cooker” that could feed the entire company.⁵⁴

Within the context of the soldiers’ dismal living conditions and callous life expectancy, looting served an important and practical, purpose: it offset shortages and augmented what was provided through official supply channels. However, if left unchecked, the pursuit of treasure behind the lines could negatively impact unit discipline and morale and undermine civil-military relations. After all, what the HLI war diarist described in light-hearted terms were, in fact, stories of Canadian troops ruthlessly pilfering crops and livestock, while the search for souvenirs and valuable items meant that they ransacked homes—whether abandoned or not. On 24 June, Capt. C. R. R. Douthwaite, the CO of the 3rd Field Security Section, reported on the aggressive looting of Canadian soldiers and how the deliberate acts of vandalism and theft were aggravating the French people and tarnishing the moral integrity of the Allied cause.⁵⁵ Therefore, unit officers were obliged to rein in the soldiers’ behaviour and enforce stronger disciplinary standards to regulate material possession so

⁵³ WD – HLI, log entry, 12 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC.

⁵⁴ Charles Martin, *Battle Diary: From D-Day and Normandy to the Zuider Zee and VE* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994), 50.

⁵⁵ WD – 3rd Field Security Section, Field Security Report No. 2, 24 June 1944, 3, RG24, vol. 16391, file 543, LAC.



Figure 5. Sergeant C. Orton of the HLI drinking pilfered cider, 20 June 1944. [Library and Archives Canada, Department of National Defence, Lieut. Ken Bell, PA-133113]

that unit morale would not fluctuate too severely during periods of shortages or surpluses.⁵⁶

Moreover, stronger disciplinary standards against looting were needed in Normandy because of the abundance of alcohol and calvados, a powerful spirit derived from apples (see Figure 5). Nearly every farmhouse had a cellar filled with it and while French civilians

⁵⁶ As the pamphlet *Morale in Battle* stated: “Morale cannot be good unless it contains a quality of hardness. Hardship and privation are the school of the good soldier; idleness and luxury are his enemies.” Bernard Montgomery, *Morale in Battle: Analysis* (Ottawa: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1947), 23, 81/289, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH).

were generous with drink upon liberation, Canadian soldiers proved adept at uncovering other stores civilians had carefully concealed. For young soldiers facing their own mortality, alcohol consumption was a welcomed release, but it posed a serious problem for unit morale and combat effectiveness. Throughout the Normandy campaign, COs in every battalion dealt with alcohol abuses. In one case, on 13 June, the CO of the HLI placed all farms out of bounds and “ordered all sheds and wine cellars locked to put temptation out of the way” and the war diarist concluded that “was one way of ensuring that all men would be at all times in a fit state for fighting.”⁵⁷ Later in the month, other battalions issued new warnings and orders against alcohol consumption because of several poisonings and deaths.⁵⁸

The tighter controls against looting, emerging towards the end of June, culminated in a widespread clampdown on discipline that was instituted in the wake of the “Great Gale” on 19-20 June. The sudden onset of a powerful storm hindered the off-loading of supplies along the Normandy coast and at the two artificial harbours (codenamed Mulberry) that the Allies had brought across the English Channel. Although the Mulberry at Arromanches remained in operation following the storm, the one at St. Laurent was irrevocably damaged and Allied logistical planning was thrown askew.⁵⁹ With supply shortages expected to rise, there were fears that looting would increase so almost every battalion issued orders prohibiting it. Following Caen’s capture, the 3rd Division’s CO, General Rod Keller, circulated a standing order placing the destroyed city out of bounds to all personnel. After explaining that the city’s residents had “lived through hell during the past month,” he told Canadian troops they were to offer assistance and support, instead of stealing: “In conclusion it must be further emphasized there must be NO

⁵⁷ WD – HLI, log entry, 13 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15076, file 754, LAC.

⁵⁸ WD – RR, battalion order, 22 June 1944, 25 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15198, file 744, LAC; WD – NNSH, log entry, 10 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15122, file 734, LAC; WD – QOR, log entry, 18 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15168, file 753, LAC; and WD – RWR, battalion order, 23 June 1944, RG24, vol. 15233, file 934/1, LAC.

⁵⁹ J. R. Martin, “Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944. Part I: The Assault and Subsequent Operations of 3 CDN Inf Div and 2 CDN Armd Bde, 6-30 June 44,” 3 December 1945, 89-90, CMHQ Report 147, DHH; and Guy Hartcup, *Code Name Mulberry: The Planning, Building, & Operation of the Normandy Harbours* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2006).

LOOTING.”⁶⁰ Whether they stole, slept or wrote letters home, Canadian soldiers killed the time between combat operations with a whole variety of actions and distractions that defined so much of their daily lives and perilous existence.

EVOLUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

After the capture of Caen in early July 1944, there was a distinct change in the types of activities and the quality of rest that soldiers received. From that point onwards, battalion and company reserve positions were not the only areas available for rest, as the space for more elaborate arrangements became possible when Allied armies moved further inland. Additionally, the 3rd Division and 2nd Armoured Brigade were not the only Canadian formations in Normandy anymore, as the 2nd Division was activated in mid-July and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division shortly thereafter. The burden of fighting was now spread over more units and, after nearly sixty days in the line, the whole 3rd Division was given a much-needed break at the beginning of August. During this period, a variety of new activities and experiences became possible. Sports teams were organised for recreational distractions and friendly competition and soldiers in at least three battalions were given an opportunity to visit Juno Beach as tourists, where they swam and relaxed for the day or toured battlefields from earlier in the campaign.⁶¹ Such activities were simply impossible in June.

The experience of being in reserve evolved in other ways. By the end of July, more personnel from the auxiliary services had landed on the continent. This meant that they could reach a greater number of soldiers with a growing diversity of field comforts, since each supervisor had a truck packed with all manner of magazines, snacks, sporting equipment and other creature comforts.⁶² Further behind the lines, supervisors with the Salvation Army and the Canadian Legion were equipped with power generators and film projectors so

⁶⁰ WD – QOR, battalion order, 11 July 1944, RG24, vol. 15169, file 753, LAC. Emphasis in original.

⁶¹ WD – QOR, log entry, 15 July 1944, RG24, vol. 15169, file 753, LAC; WD – NNSH, log entry, 1 August 1944, RG24, vol. 15122, file 734, LAC; and WD – CSR, log entries, 1-7 August 1944, RG24, vol. 15038, file 734(400), LAC.

⁶² Young, *Red Shield in Action*, 108.

they could host movie nights. On more than a few occasions troops packed into makeshift theatres to watch Ida Lupino star in the 1943 film *The Hard Way* or the 1944 hit *Standing Room Only* starring Fred MacMurray and Paulette Goddard.⁶³ The Knights of Columbus put on several comedic shows to entertain the troops before the specialised entertainment units arrived on the continent.⁶⁴ As a testament to the importance of the auxiliary services and their provision of extracurricular activities, Capt. Bryson Kearns of the HLI explained that they should have been allowed to frequent the front lines more often instead of remaining in the rear and that the system should have been specially adapted in cases where a single division was committed for long periods of time.⁶⁵

Aside from entertainment, the expanded beachhead made room for other logistical arrangements that carried immense influence over the parameters of the soldiers' experiences. The larger amount of space, coupled with the increasing resources deployed by II Canadian Corps in July, allowed for the establishment of field kitchens and bakeries for the first time in Normandy. Since these services were all present when the 2nd and 4th Divisions were activated in the last half of the campaign, quite often the 3rd Division's unique experience without them is obscured or ignored altogether by historians. However, few troops in the 3rd Division were ignorant of the momentous dietary change. The Can Scots' war diarist wrote a lengthy remark about the arrival of "dry rations" (food "cooked in a rear area and ... trucked up to the front") after more than fifty days of composite (or compo) rations:

It has been decided to alternate dry and compo rations from day to day. The cooks are given more scope in this case and can prepare more interesting meals. It has been noted, too, that complaints about cooking are quite rare now. We have all been cooking our own food up 'till this time and appreciate the incumbent difficulties.⁶⁶

⁶³ WD – RR, log entry, 23 and 31 July 1944, RG24, vol. 15199, file 744, LAC; and Young, *Red Shield in Action*, 108-09.

⁶⁴ WD – QOR, log entry, 16 July 1944, RG24, vol. 15169, file 753, LAC.

⁶⁵ "BEQ #122, Capt. Bryson Kearns," RG24, vol. 10450, LAC.

⁶⁶ WD – CSR, log entry 27-28 July 1944, RG24, vol. 15037, file 734(400), LAC.

The change was a considerable departure from previous practices. In the weeks after D-Day, the stalemate outside Caen became a stubborn problem for unit messing that demanded decentralisation. Since the Allied lines were under constant observation and the Germans could shell any part of the beachhead, groups of soldiers crowding around field kitchens invited immediate mortar fire. Therefore, opportunities for feeding had to be seized upon by company or platoon commanders whenever they arose, meaning that for the first six weeks in Normandy, soldiers subsisted on tinned rations cooked in their slit trenches. To help attenuate the dietary monotony, the British and Canadians utilised compo rations which provided soldiers with fourteen meals of various types per box, thus allowing greater variety. Soldiers could mix and match tins of meat, sausage, bacon, Irish stew, steak and kidney pudding, sweets, margarine, vegetables, biscuits and beans to form their own menus at mealtimes.⁶⁷ Although the compo rations were the primary food supply, soldiers were also issued emergency rations before combat operations, which could feed them for a day while the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps and the battalion's Quartermaster brought fresh compo rations forward.⁶⁸

Although welcomed by the troops, the changing dietary experience brought unintended consequences and suffering. The new field kitchens may have provided greater quality and varieties of foods, but they also centralised the cooking in rear areas, now safe from German shelling. This meant that more soldiers were eating food cooked with the same utensils and in the same pots and kitchens, rather than in isolated slit trenches. More problematically, food cooked in the rear had to be transported forward to the troops (who were already living in squalor) through the wasteland of dead bodies, animal carcasses and destroyed landscapes created by the grizzly fighting at Verrières Ridge and towards Falaise. The hot summer sun baked the putrefying mess and spawned swarms of flies. In fact, there were so many flies in Normandy, they buzzed across the battlefields south of Caen in black clouds, moving from decaying flesh and hastily

⁶⁷ *Operational Feeding: The Use of Field Rations, 1942* (Ottawa: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1942), 1-7, 78/361, DHH; "Army Nutrition: Notes for Medical Officers," n.d., 1-12, RG24, vol. 12634, file 11/Rations/9, LAC; "Food Facts to Keep You Fighting Fit," n.d., 1-5, RG24, vol. 12633, file 11/Rations/4, LAC; Ellis, *The Sharp End of War*, 275-77; and George Blackburn, *The Guns of Normandy: A Soldier's Eye View, France 1944* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995), 46-51.

⁶⁸ Warren, *Wait for the Wagon*, 280-85.

constructed latrines to soldiers' bodies and equipment and to their food and cooking utensils.⁶⁹ The conditions were ripe for the spread of disease and mass food poisoning.

It was not long before disaster struck, in the form of what Maj. E. L. Davey, the CO of the 7th Field Hygiene Section attached to the 3rd Division, called "mild outbreaks of diarrhoea or gastro intestinal disturbances." According to him, the cases were not severe enough "to warrant evacuation or cause the affected personnel to be off duty for more than 24 hours."⁷⁰ But later bacterial tests of stool samples proved that Davey's initial assessment was partially mistaken: 20 to 30 per cent of the samples tested positive for "Flexner A-2" and were therefore categorised as "mild dysentery."⁷¹ Yet it is doubtful that anyone suffering from that terrible sickness would have described it as mild. The awful by-product of bad nutrition, squalor and contaminated foods, dysentery brought soldiers to their knees, convulsing with severe cramps and fever followed by uncontrollable and painful bowel movements expelling blood, mucus and fecal matter. It was a horrible plague that sapped energy from the soul and eventually complicated offensive operations. As George Blackburn later remembered:

One man's dysentery-induced expulsion aroused my own memories of the convulsive cramps and feverish, shuddering ague brought on by that damnable scourge that struck the Canadian Army around Verrières before the drive down the Falaise road began, which worsened as time went on to the point where it came close to putting some units out of action when supplies of medicine to treat it ran out.⁷²

Records from Davey's unit and the other Field Hygiene sections attached to Canadian divisions documented the deteriorating health and sanitary conditions at the front. Although living conditions remained dreadful in June and early July, the fact that Canadian

⁶⁹ WD – 13th Field Hygiene Section, Major C. L. Pearson, "Monthly Hygiene Report, August 1944," 31 August 1944, 3, RG24, vol. 15937, file 202, LAC; and Major F. O. R. Garner, "Quarterly Report (July, August, & Sept, 44)," 10 October 1944, 3, RG24, vol. 12593, file 11/12 FD HYG SEC/1, LAC.

⁷⁰ WD – ADMS, Major E. L. Davey, "Monthly Hygiene Report, 7th Field Hygiene Section," 2 August 1944, 1-2, RG24, vol. 15661, file 700, LAC.

⁷¹ WD – ADMS, Davey, "Monthly Hygiene Report," 2 August 1944, 2, RG24, vol. 15661, file 700, LAC.

⁷² Blackburn, *The Guns of Normandy*, xv.

units occupied the same general positions north of Caen meant that there were opportunities for work parties to develop better sanitation infrastructure while the stalemate settled in. Coupled with the excellent physical fitness of the soldiers, gained through years of training prior to D-Day, this appears to have prevented any severe outbreaks of disease and only a modest increase in sickness was recorded during the first half of the campaign. In the five weeks before the capture of Caen, medical units in the 3rd Division treated 452 sicknesses for more than twenty-four hours, of which only fifty-two were diagnosed under the catch-all heading “Diseases of the Digestive System,” later used to describe the epidemic.⁷³

However, everything changed in July and August. Right as the depleted 3rd Division was fighting down the Caen-Falaise highway, a total of 1,330 sicknesses were recorded, 648 of which were digestive diseases and almost all were bouts of food poisoning and dysentery.⁷⁴ Luckily, most cases were not considered life threatening by medical authorities as the symptoms lasted no longer than twenty-four hours. But this was just the tip of the iceberg: because the duration of the symptoms was an important factor in tabulating the weekly summaries, only those patients treated for more than a day were recorded, meaning that the vast bulk of cases were not counted in official statistics. However, the gravity of the situation compelled medical and hygiene officers to make special notations in their reports about the vile conditions prevailing everywhere. Maj. C. L. Pearson, CO of the 13th Field Hygiene Section attached to 2nd Division, noted that a “mild infectious diarrhoea that caused slight disability for 24 hours” was prevalent throughout August and it “affected at some time or other about 80%” of the entire division.⁷⁵ Similarly, the CO of the 12th Field Hygiene Section attached to 4th Division, estimated that “at least 90% of personnel [in the division] had diarrhoea of varying severity” in August.⁷⁶

⁷³ WD – ADMS, “Weekly Summary of Sick, Injured, and Dead,” various dates, June-July 1944, RG24, vol. 15661, file 700, LAC.

⁷⁴ WD – ADMS, “Weekly Summary of Sick, Injured, and Dead,” various dates in August and September 1944, RG24, vol. 15661, file 700, LAC; and Davey, “Monthly Hygiene Report,” 3 September 1944, 2, RG24, vol. 15661, file 700, LAC.

⁷⁵ WD – 13th Field Hygiene Section, Pearson, “Monthly Hygiene Report, August 1944,” 3, RG24, vol. 15937, file 202, LAC.

⁷⁶ Garner, “Quarterly Report,” 10 October 1944, 2-3, RG24, vol. 12593, file 11/12 FD HYG SEC/1, LAC.

Changing weather patterns in September and the institution of “vigorous fly control measures concentrated at kitchens and ration points, more efficient mess tin washing, greater sanitary sense on the part of cooks, flyproofing of latrines and refuse pits” brought an end to the epidemic.⁷⁷ However, by then the scourge had wreaked havoc on the strength and effectiveness of many Canadian units. For example, during Operation Tractable (14-16 August 1944), the Can Scots were ordered to attack Point 168, just north of Falaise, but the German resistance there proved to be fierce and unforgiving. According to the war diarist, on 15 August the unit “stepped into a molten fire bath of battle” and suffered dearly capturing Point 168: thirty-three killed and 119 wounded, its highest single-day casualties for the entire Normandy campaign.⁷⁸ Yet lost in discussions of that battle is the fact that the Can Scots fought it without their talented and popular CO, Lt.-Col. F. N. Cabeldu. On 10 August, he and several others from battalion headquarters were “struck by the scourge of soldiers” and evacuated to the rear with severe cases of the stomach flu, enteritis and dysentery.⁷⁹ Thus, the Battle for Point 168 was overseen by the unit’s second-in-command, Maj. R. M. Lendrum; an unfortunate trial by fire for the first-time battalion commander. Robbed of experienced leadership, a lesser unit might have faltered during the intense clash but the Can Scots had a well-earned reputation as an exceptional unit and its troops persevered to secure their objectives; a remarkable feat considering that many were likely suffering from the same afflictions as Cabeldu.

The magnitude of the accomplishments at Falaise should be obvious to anyone who can recall their last bout of food poisoning or stomach flu and the convalescences it took to recover from that unpleasant experience. Sapped of energy and without the benefit of civilian comforts, it is hard to imagine how anyone could have functioned in those life and death situations encountered by Canadians as they closed the Falaise Gap and ended the Battle of Normandy. Yet as George Blackburn so eloquently stated, “the war historians” and “armchair strategists,” writing years after the fact, showed little appreciation for the conditions in which soldiers fought and unfairly

⁷⁷ WD – 13th Field Hygiene Section, Pearson, “Monthly Hygiene Report, August 1944,” 3, RG24, vol. 15937, file 202, LAC.

⁷⁸ WD – CSR, log entry, 15 August 1944, RG24, vol. 15038, file 734(400), LAC; and Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 231.

⁷⁹ WD – CSR, log entry, 10 August 1944, RG24, vol. 15038, file 734(400), LAC.

criticised the “slow” operational progress as a missed opportunity to destroy a larger German force. Instead, those critics “should have spent more time wondering how men ever summoned up the necessary moral courage and physical stamina to get there at all.”⁸⁰ The soldiers who survived the hell of Normandy were more forgiving than later historians. As the Can Scots war diarist noted on 17 August: “We were delighted to learn that Lt. Col. Cabeldu had left hospital and was now at our A Echelon resting. He will return to [battalion headquarters] tomorrow. All ranks stated though, that our leader in absence of Lt. Col. Cabeldu, A/C.O. Major Lendrum had done a difficult job well.”⁸¹

CONCLUSION

Throughout the end of August 1944, the whole Canadian line was engulfed by intense and bitter clashes against a desperate enemy in difficult terrain. The Can Scots’ war diarist, like his counterparts in other battalions, wrote several log entries that recounted the unrelenting and remorseless nature of the fighting. On 20 August, he wrote that “the strain of battle seemed to leave men both weak and restless. Even though 5 days have elapsed since ‘Hill 168’ everyone still carries many ugly memories of the hell of that day. Rest seems to be the best cure for battle after-effects. Nerves calm and mental wounds have an opportunity to heal.”⁸² At that point, morale in Canadian units was ebbing and many desperately needed time in reserve to recover from sustained combat operations. As this article has shown, the provision of rest in reserve positions was crucial to sustaining morale and combat operations in the 3rd Division during the Battle of Normandy. Those forces stationed in reserve offered battalions and brigades sufficient defensive depth and offensive potential, while the constant rotation of subunits allowed commanders to manage the physical and psychological strain of battle. These periodic breaks weaponised rest and proved useful in forestalling battle exhaustion and rebuilding cohesive fighting units ahead of the next engagement.

For those at the sharpest end, being stationed in reserve might have provided some relief but it did not entail a holiday. To be tactically and

⁸⁰ Blackburn, *The Guns of Normandy*, xv.

⁸¹ WD – CSR, log entry, 17 August 1944, RG24, vol. 15038, file 734(400), LAC.

⁸² WD – CSR, log entry, 20 August 1944, RG24, vol. 15038, file 734(400), LAC.

operationally relevant, battalion and company reserve positions could never be located more than a few hundred metres away from the front, so short, periodic rotations into reserve were all that could be offered to soldiers until the capture of Caen in early July. Moreover, reserve units were often employed as surplus labour and tasked with improving infrastructure or training replacements, which greatly impacted the quality of rest for those recently rotated from the front. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the reserve position opened up a variety of non-combat related experiences, events and activities that defined much of the soldiers' daily life. In reserve, they could wash themselves and their clothes, sleep, write letters, loot supplies from their surroundings and restore the reservoirs of courage needed to continue fighting.

The significance of rest and the reserve position also evolved as the campaign in Normandy moved inland. Prior to the capture of Caen in early July, the beachhead was too narrow and congested to support elaborate logistical arrangements, such as field kitchens or entertainment venues. But after Caen's capture, Allied forces finally secured enough territory to establish more sophisticated services in rear areas. Behind the lines and out of range of German shelling, a logistical and administrative transformation took place as more units disembarked and entered the battle. The scourge of dysentery and food poisoning that ravaged Canadian troops as they fought towards Falaise was symptomatic of this transformation and further demonstrates the interconnectedness between the frontline and reserve positions. The reserve position was thus a critical lynchpin to Canadian combat operations in Normandy and a central element of the experience of war for the common soldier.

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